

## "I-Search a Word": Reclaiming the Library's Reference Section

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Midway through a poem by Mark Van Doren I had just discovered, I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder.

"Would you please help me with *Granger's Index to Poetry*?" asked Arantza, an exchange student from Spain. "I've found 'freedom' in this subject part, but how do I find a poem?"

I looked around the library. Students were clustered over reference books, a few standing, most sitting. Some were chatting. Some were working alone. Michelle, with *Granger's* open in her hands, was heading for the stacks. I called her over and asked her to help Arantza find a poem in the index and then locate it in an anthology. Michelle agreed, and they were off in search of "freedom."

The students are used to helping each other in our interactive classroom. To serve as each other's experts is only natural in this research assignment which encourages students to discover knowledge together. The "I-Search a Word" utilizes techniques which introduce students to the library's main reference sources, and it allows students to explore thoroughly many aspects of a single word in the English language. The only assignment of its type in my composition curriculum, it requires that the students take careful notes on both the information and their process and then integrate the information, their interpretations and reflections, and the record of their personal search into a rather lengthy final paper—one of which they are generally quite proud.

### The Basic I-Search a Word Assignment

1. Make arrangements with the librarian for your students to work in the library for at least three days. The students will need some sort of orienta-

tion to the reference books you choose to work with.

2. Work with the librarian so that the resources listed in the student directions and others you might wish to add are easily accessible.
3. Prepare (or, preferably, brainstorm with the students) a list of thirty words which express something intangible, for example, envy, joy, kindness, love, revenge, hatred, energy, jealousy, success, freedom, knowledge.
4. Provide each student with a copy of the directions provided in Figures 1 and 2.

### The Students' Response

The students approach the task with diligence and determination, and generally, they enjoy it. Why? The responses vary. Most students like the "I-Search a Word" because it gets them out of the classroom and allows them choice in their topic. They feel a sense of accomplishment for meeting head-on a real challenge: making sense out of the small print in those heavy, strange books, most of which they've never seen or heard of.

Realistically, in the case of the majority of our students, they never *would* see or hear of many of these sources, except through an assignment such as this. And because some of what they read is either technical or out of context, and that situation is acknowledged, the students are willing to make a stab at understanding because they don't feel the imminent threat of failure. This frees them to make sense of their research on their own terms, for *their* particular purposes.

They also seem to like the notion that they are allowed to express their opinions, on both their findings and this assignment. And they are generally amazed at their rather impressive papers full

of quotes from exotic sources that they've personally examined. In the process, the students learn something about the library and their language. Most, in the end, admit that it wasn't a terribly painful, boring experience; in fact, they see it as worthwhile—even fun!

### Breathing Life into a Research Assignment

I created the "I-Search a Word" several years ago in response to my own need to develop a mini-research paper for a composition class. I had taught versions of Ken Macrorie's "I-Search" paper to seniors, and I liked the concept *and* the product. Vocabulary teaching, in general, was not only unproductive in terms of real learning but also boring to both the students and the teacher. Why not, I thought, devise an assignment which would immerse the students in language study, enable them to feel its richness, get them to the library, teach them a little poetry, and reinforce the notion of learning as discovery, an individual quest for knowledge?

I decided that I would attempt an extended definition of an abstract word, a challenging project in view of the cognitive tasks inherent in the nature of the assignment and the reluctance inherent in the nature of many of these students. Definition, for most writers, is a most demanding writing assignment. According to Edward Jenkinson and Donald Seybold (1970, *Writing as a Process of Discovery: Some Structured Theme Assignments for Grades Five through Twelve*, Bloomington: Indiana UP):

It is extremely difficult for anyone to define a word that does not have objective, physical referents. Yet, the ideas, feelings, and emotions that are most significant in our lives are conveyed through words that have no single physical referent. Many of the concepts that abstract words designate exist only in the minds of men. Hence, everyone who uses such words as *freedom*, *rich*, or *love* has slightly different notions about what those words mean, and it is not uncommon to find people who do not know exactly what they mean when they use many abstract words. In spite of this, we frequently act as if we are talking about the same thing when we use such words. We assume we know what words mean when we sometimes don't; we even fight wars over ideologies, yet we are hard-pressed to tell another person in any specific way what it is we are fighting for or against.

It is important that we understand what we are really asking a student to do when we ask him to define an abstract term. (124)

Working together with the librarian, I began by

mapping out the basic strategy for the research and writing of this paper. But every time I set this assignment into motion, I discover new things I want to incorporate to make it more interesting for me and the students.

### Extending the "I-Search a Word" Assignment

As a group, we begin by generating a list of abstract terms, and then each student selects a different word. Before I hand out the assignment, the students write at least a page on what they already know about their word and give their reasons for selecting it. We also spend one day creating metaphors for the words. (For example, if "bewilderment" were a fruit, it would be a kiwi because. . . .) These prewriting activities help the students to get a feel for their words, establish ownership, and spark interest.

To suit my needs as a changing teacher in an interactive classroom, I have begun to place more emphasis on dialoguing in the writing process. My students do creative dialogues in pairs before the whole class, pretending they *are* their words caught up in some kind of conflict. They also give five-minute oral reports on their words at the end of this assignment.

Because of my interest in the writing/thinking connection, I am also focusing more on the students' individual learning processes by asking them to keep a sort of metacognitive log during this assignment. The students' creations of a "visual representation" of their word through a mandala, time line, or multimedia work are another addition to the original assignment.

The possibilities for extension and application are endless. The seniors I teach recently completed a definition paper on one word as representative of a theme from *Macbeth*. For the paper, the students consulted three print sources, conducted an interview, and analyzed passages from the play. The paper is a reflective piece, not a report. It is a synthesis of their findings and opinions on an idea or quality, such as loyalty, in our society today.

Most important, the "I-Search a Word" assignment should be individualized to suit a teacher's needs for the students and the curriculum.

### Rationale for Teaching the "I-Search a Word"

For me, there are several good reasons to approach research in this fashion. Among them are the elements of student choice, focus on process

## I-Search a Word Student Directions (cont.)

### Writing the Paper

This paper is as much about the process of discovering your word as it is about your word itself. Feel free to use "I" in this paper. Here is one possible method of organization for your paper. However, this is your paper, and I encourage you to choose a method of organization which best "shows off" the information you have gathered and allows you to integrate that information with your interpretation, personal insights, and experience with this search into an effective paper. Remember, it is your voice which will unify the whole paper.

#### Introduction:

Paragraph 1: Write the most interesting thing you discovered about your word itself.

Paragraph 2: Tell the story of your overall search for information about your word. Be sure to describe any difficulties you encountered in making your search.

#### Body:

Paragraphs 3-10: Write one or more paragraphs on each source, including your summary of the information, your interpretation of that information, and your personal comment on what you found. In each paragraph, be sure to include complete information about your source: book title, author or editor, and page number. Remember, you are reporting what you have learned.

#### Conclusion:

Final paragraph: Write your response to this project. Overall, what did you learn? Did you like the method? Were you frustrated? Did you amaze yourself with your ability to handle reference books and write such an impressive paper?

### Bibliography

Your teacher will provide you with a form to follow in writing up the bibliography, if it is required.

### Submitting the Paper

When you turn in this research package, it should include all of your notes, photocopies, rough drafts, and the final copy of your paper.

Figure 2.

## I-Search a Word Student Directions

### Researching the Word

From the list, choose one word that you think you can live with for at least two weeks.

Be sure to write down the book title, author or editor, and page number for each of the sources. You might want to use a separate piece of paper or notecard for each word to allow space for notes on your search and the interpretation of your word. This procedure also allows for easier organization of your sources when you write your paper.

You may complete these activities in any order, using other sources if time permits.

--Look up your word in an unabridged dictionary. Copy the word's etymology and its first definition. Photocopy or hand copy the remaining definitions.

--Look up your word in a thesaurus. Copy the first group of synonyms and all the boldfaced words. You might need these synonyms as substitutes for your word if you run into difficulty finding your original word in some of the sources.

--Look up your word in a concordance to the Bible. Find a verse which contains your word, then look up that verse in the Bible. Copy your verse and the verse before and after it.

--Look up your word in the Concordance to Shakespeare. Find a passage which contains your word, then look it up in any of the complete works of Shakespeare. Copy the whole speech which contains your word and the speech before and after it. Include the speaker's name, act, scene, and line number.

--Look up your word in Granger's Index to Poetry. Using one of the poetry anthologies in your library, find and copy a poem which contains your word.

--Look up your word in a book of quotations. Copy a quotation in which your word appears, including all identifying information.

--Look up your word in the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature. Find a magazine article which deals with your word. Locate the article, if available in your school library. Read and summarize the article.

--Look up your word in the Oxford English Dictionary. Copy the first paragraph for your word, then photocopy or handcopy the rest of the information on your word. Try to determine the history of your word and describe some of the changes it has gone through over the years. Pinpoint some interesting aspect of your word and/or this particular reference book.

Figure 1.

rather than the simple accumulation of data, and the encouragement of the student's voice in the writing of the paper. As Nancy Martin points out (1976, *Writing and Learning across the Curriculum 11-16*, qtd. in *Inside Out*, Dan Kirby and Tom Liner, 1981, Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook),

Much effective writing seems to be on a continuum somewhere between expressive and the transactional. This applies to adult writing as well as children's writing. What is worrying is that in much school writing, the student is expected to exclude expressive features. . . . The demand for impersonal, unexpressive writing can actively inhibit learning because it isolates what is to be learned from the vital learning process—that of making links between what is already known and the new information. The [effective] expository writing task asks the student to reconcile what he/she already knows with new knowledge or experience. As a student develops as a writer, he/she should be more able to bring appropriate inner resources to bear on knowledge of the outside world. (3)

Creating opportunities for our students to interact with knowledge of the outside world—specifically, in this assignment, those generally untouched resources in our school libraries—is important. Unintimidating research procedures allow students to tap their inner resources of knowledge, personal experiences, and opinions—however formed—and encourage the development of voice in their writing. Synthesizing research findings with those inner resources builds students' confidence in themselves as thinkers, learners, and writers. The other obvious reason for ap-

proaching research in this manner is to make the whole process more enjoyable for both student and teacher. Dan Kirby and Tom Liner might agree:

Breathing life into the old research papers is not easy. Almost no one enjoys them. The students hate them because they take planning and discipline. The teachers hate them because they have to read and grade them, and they're mostly dull. The librarian hates them because that means thirty kids in the library for two weeks misfiling encyclopedias. Parents hate them because it means driving their kids to the university or city library on weekends. There seems to be no way out of the dilemma, however. High school English teachers think they fail their college-bound students if they don't assign the research paper. For me the value of the research project is in the process rather than the product. Good research projects are problem-solving experiences that challenge students and leave them with a positive feeling when finished. (179)

Teachers must give students the freedom to select and explore their own areas of interest, Nancy Martin and others remind us (1976, *Writing and Learning across the Curriculum 11-16*, qtd. in *In the Trenches: Help for the Newly Recruited, Shellshocked, and Battle-Fatigued Teachers of Writing*, Patricia Simmons Taylor, et al., 1982, Los Angeles: UCLA Publications Services Department, 153). Only if the teacher assumes the role of guide and if students are free to generate their own motivation will they become fully engaged in learning as a mode of creative discovery.

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